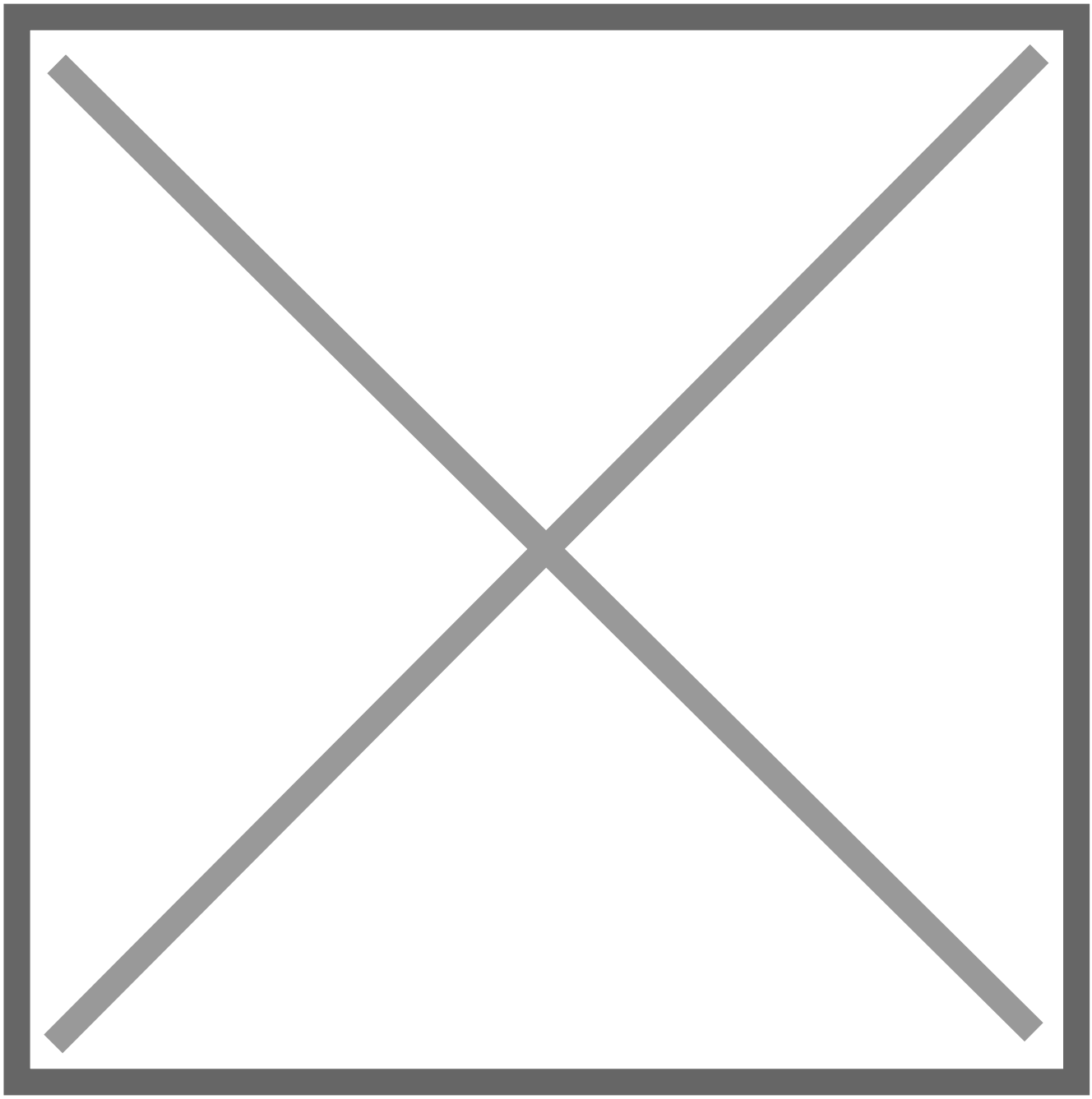


A first-grade student wearing a protective mask and shield receives hand sanitizer from his mother in a classroom at Al-Mahdi School in Tehran, Iran, Sept. 5, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS photo/West Asia News Agency via Reuters/Majid Asgaripour/)

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Vatican City — September 10, 2020
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The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education called for an alliance between Catholic and non-Catholic educational institutions in order to confront the challenges stemming from or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter published Sept. 9 in the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, the congregation said the pandemic has emphasized "the need for an increasingly communal and shared educational pact that—drawing strength from the Gospel and the teachings of the church—will contribute a generous and open synergy to spread an authentic culture of encounter."

The letter was signed by Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and Archbishop Angelo Zani, the congregation's secretary.

As many schools and universities begin a new academic year, many continue to rely on remote learning to prevent the spread of the coronavirus among faculty and students.

In its letter, the congregation said that although digital platforms have allowed for education to continue, they also have brought to light "a marked disparity in educational and technological opportunities."

"According to recent data provided by international agencies, about 10 million children will not be able to access education in the coming years, increasing the already existing educational gap," the congregation said.

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While remote learning is "necessary in this extremely critical moment," it has underscored the importance of in-person learning and interactions with students and teachers, which is "indispensable for the formation of the person and for a critical understanding of reality."

"In classrooms, lecture halls and laboratories, we grow together and build a sense of identity in relationship," the letter said. "At all ages of life, but all the more so in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, the process of psycho-pedagogical growth cannot take place without an encounter with others, and the presence of the other provides the necessary conditions for creativity and inclusion to flourish."

Teachers, the letter continued, also face myriad challenges and must be thanked and supported for their commitment.

"Their invaluable contribution—which has changed profoundly over the years, both from a social and technical point of view—needs to be supported through a solid continuing education that knows how to meet the needs of the times without losing that synthesis between faith, culture and life, which is the keystone of the educational mission implemented in Catholic schools and universities," the congregation said.

The Congregation for Catholic Education said the current situation calls for "an increasingly communal and shared educational pact" that emphasizes the relationship between people and the educational community.

That relationship, it said, "cannot find sufficient home in the interaction mediated by a screen or in the impersonal connections of the digital network."

"In the perspective of future school and academic planning, albeit amidst uncertainties and concerns, those responsible for society are called to give greater importance to education in all its formal and informal dimensions by coordinating efforts to support and ensure, in these difficult times, the educational commitment of all," the congregation said.